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Pakistan's Nuclear Behaviour and Deterrence Breakdown

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Pakistan started to develop nuclear weapon in 1972 after the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971. It conducted the first nuclear test on 28 and 30 May 1998 in response to India's nuclear test that was carried out in the same month. Since its inception, Pakistan's nuclear development programme and nuclear strategy have largely remained India centric and it essentially seeks to deter India's conventional force superiority.

A close look at changes in Pakistan's nuclear policy over the years indicates this India centric posture. While its position has remained constant on some policies like the possibility of nuclear first use, Pakistan's nuclear posture has been witnessing constant evolution on policy like minimum credible deterrence[1]. Over time, the strategy of minimum credible deterrence has changed to credible minimum deterrence, credible minimum full spectrum deterrence and more recently as "Full Spectrum Deterrence posture remaining within the precincts of policy of Credible Minimum Deterrence" that reflects in the official statements of Pakistan armed forces[2]. These changes in nuclear posture and inclusion of new technologies have the potential to impact the deterrence stability in the region. The evolution in nuclear posture has come into being with the introduction of tactical nuclear missile Nasr and submarine-launched cruise missile Babur-3. With the introduction of Babur-3 Pakistan has also claimed to have credible second-strike capability[3].

Pakistan perceives India's military modernisation and development in the field of nuclear & missile programme as a serious threat and seeks to neutralise this impact by further developing nuclear and missile capabilities. This threat perception is clearly visible from the fact that Pakistan's longest-range missile Shaheen III is developed to cover all the parts of India including Andaman and Nicobar Islands that are "being developed as strategic bases"[4]. According to Pakistani scholar, "this way of looking at deterrence makes the issue of nuclear arsenals

more relative and therefore pushes Pakistan toward an arms buildup"[5].

Likewise, Pakistan perceives India's investment in ballistic missile defence (BMD) system and sea-based deterrent as destabilising. In order to neutralise its perceived threat, Pakistan's military and nuclear capability build up have increased significantly in recent years. Some significant developments include the development of TNW Nasr, MIRV capable missile, submarine-based nuclear missile and land, air and sea-based cruise missiles. While it might serve Pakistan's nuclear posture of first use of nuclear weapon, these developments seriously disturb the stability in the region and increase chances of failure in command and control or unauthorised use.

As Pakistan's nuclear weapons development accelerated, it decided to use nuclear weapon as a shield behind which it could support terrorist groups fighting India. Among these developments, one of the most significant additions is TNW Nasr. Nasr missile was developed to counter India's "Cold Start" doctrine. Nasr was introduced to lower the nuclear threshold by using low yield battle field nuclear weapon. In Pakistan's perception, while nuclear deterrence will prevent a major nuclear war, it leaves space for limited conflict. Thus, one of the methods of increasing conventional deterrence is the introduction of low yield nuclear weapons.[6] Pakistan also claims that the Nasr is effective against India's ballistic missile defence (BMD) system. This claim is ambiguous considering the fact that the primary objective of Nasr missile is to use it in battle field for counterforce targeting, whereas BMD systems are primarily developed to provide necessary missile shield to major Indian cities like Delhi and Mumbai.

Also, Pakistan's integration of short-range systems and tactical nuclear weapon like Nasr in conventional defence of Pakistan poses a serious problem of escalation of conflict and misinterpretation. The use of terms like "quick reactionary, shoot and scoot missile" to describe TNW Nasr, indicates likely quick response or ease of use of this missile which lowers the threshold of nuclear conflict.[7]

Besides Nasr, other significant developments in Pakistan's nuclear inventory includes the air-launched cruise missile Ra'ad, with a range of 350 km and Ra'ad II with a range 700 km that is claimed to have developed to provide Pakistan with "strategic standoff capability on land and at sea"[8]. Among these, Ra'ad II is the most recent addition and first time tested in February 2020. Apart from these, Pakistan has Babur, land-based cruise missile and its sea-based variant, submarine-launched cruise missile, Babur-3. This investment in sea-based deterrent is to ensure secure second-strike capability and nuclear triad.

Pakistan also claimed to have successfully tested MIRV capable Ababeel missile. Analysts

indicate that Pakistan has received significant Chinese assistance to develop this technology and Pakistan would have to face a number of technical challenges before claiming to develop successful MIRV technology[9]. MIRV capability provides the attacking state disarming counterforce strike capability and with greater accuracy. Pakistan's land-based MIRV system indicates essentially first strike capability. With the increased risk of crisis, these developments are likely to have a negative impact on regional deterrence stability, since the first use of nuclear weapons will pose an existential threat to both the hostile neighbours.

With the development of dual capable missiles of varied range in recent years, specifically particular emphasis on the development of relatively short range dual capable systems like Nasr, Abdali and Ghaznavi, Pakistan claims to have strengthened its deterrence. But, use of such missiles in the counterforce battlefield situations adds significant risk of nuclear escalation. Likewise, the addition of counterforce nuclear missile might require a high level of readiness that will increase the risk of escalation as operation ready nuclear weapons will increase the possibility of a conflict. The risk of escalation associated with the growing dependency on nuclear weapon must be realised to contain the growth of nuclear weapon development and stockpiling and to lower the risk of deterrence breakdown in the subcontinent.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

[1] Press release no. PR-235/2009-ISPR, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), 03 July 2009 at https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=745 accessed on 28 August 2020.

[2] Press release no. PR-32/2019-ISPR, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), 24 January 2019 at https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=5173 and press release no. PR-254/2014-ISPR, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), 17 November 2014 at https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=2707b accessed on 28 August 2020.

[3] Press release no. PR-10/2017-ISPR, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), 09 January 2017 at https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=3672 accessed on 28 August 2020.

[4] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2015. "A Conversation with Gen. Khalid Kidwai." Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference 2015. Transcript. March 23, pp. 10. Available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-230315carnegieKIDWAI.pdf

[5] Sadia Tasleem, *"Pakistan's Nuclear Use Doctrine"*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 June 2016 at https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/pakistan-s-nuclear-use-doctrine-pub-63913#:~:text=The%20key%20policy%20goal%20of,the%20event%20of%20a%20war.

[6] Arun Sahgal, "Logic and Options for Use" in *Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons*, edited by Gurmeet Kanwal and Monica Chansoria, 2014, KW publisher Pvt Ltd in association with Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

[7] ISPR report No. PR-94/2011-ISPR, 19 April 2011, accessed on 01 July 2020.

[8] ISPR report No PR-27/2020-ISPR, 18 February 2020 at https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=5625, accessed on 20 February 2020.

[9] Rajaram Nagappa, "Does Pakistan's Ababeel Medium Range Ballistic Missile Really Have MIRV Capability?" *Delhi Defence Review (blog)*, February 3, 2017 at http://delhidefencereview.com/2017/02/03/does-pakistans-ababeel-medium-range-ballistic-missile-really-have-mirv-capability/